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AUTHOR Proctor, Russell F., II
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ABSTRACT

While a number of feature films can be used in group-process instruction, "Twelve Angry Men" and "The Breakfast Club" are particularly valuable for analyzing group communication patterns and strategies. "Twelve Angry Men" demonstrates that persuasion in groups can take place through a variety of methods. Exercises based on the film can raise issues such as: critical thinking (by both the jury and the students); ethics in persuasion; tasks and maintenance roles in group process; bases of power; defensive communication; and principles of argumentation and debate. "The Breakfast Club" provides the group cohesion that results from the characters' self-disclosure and provides the climate for the characters to adopt new roles. Essay questions can address questions raised by the film. By assigning more than one movie, or by showing several segments, instructors can use feature films to expose their students to a variety of groups in action. (One table listing 15 feature films suitable for instruction in group communication is included; 18 references and handouts describing classroom exercises for "Twelve Angry Men" are attached.) (RS)

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Teaching Group Communication with Feature Films

Russell F. Proctor II

CS507751

Russell F. Proctor II is Assistant Professor of Speech Communication at Northern Kentucky University, Highland Heights, KY 41099-0600. This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, Atlanta, Nov. 1, 1991.

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A recent article in Communication Education (Proctor & Adler, 1991) provides a rationale for teaching interpersonal communication with feature films. The same rationale supports the use of movies in group communication instruction. Shields and Kidd were pioneers in this area, discussing group-process applications for The Poseidon Adventure in 1973. This essay augments and updates their work by suggesting several other useful movies, and by describing how two specific films, Twelve Angry Men and The Breakfast Club, can be similarly employed.

FEATURE FILMS FOR GROUP COMMUNICATION INSTRUCTION

Defining a particular feature film as a "group" movie, as opposed to an "interpersonal" movie, is often an arbitrary distinction. Additionally, any film depicting a family, an office staff, a military platoon, or a sports team can (and perhaps should) be regarded as a movie about group interaction. Nevertheless, certain films lend themselves particularly well to analysis of group features--roles, norms, status, leadership, cohesiveness, conformity, culture--and their effects on group communication.

Table 1 identifies films that have been useful in group communication instruction.[1] While the list is not exhaustive, it represents a variety of "tried-and-true" resources. Some of the movies, such as Twelve Angry Men and Memphis Belle, portray groups whose primary objective is the completion of a specific task. In contrast, films such as The Breakfast Club and Steel Magnolias focus on social and relational themes rather than task achievement in groups. Some movies in Table 1 (e.g., Breaking Away) illustrate both social development in groups and the pursuit of specific group goals. The educational objectives of the instructor should guide the selection of films.

Insert Table 1 here

TWELVE ANGRY MEN AND THE BREAKFAST CLUB

While each movie in Table 1 can be used in group-process instruction, Twelve Angry Men and The Breakfast Club are particularly valuable for analyzing group communication patterns and strategies. What sets them apart is their intensive focus on face-to-face oral interaction. Both stories depict sequestered groups who have little to do except talk with each other. Twelve Angry Men takes place in a small, hot jury room, where consensus must be reached before any of the title characters may leave. In The Breakfast Club, five students serve detention together in a high school library, where they reside for the better portion of a Saturday. The stories thus share a common premise: virtual strangers, who are confined together for several hours, make decisions, manage conflict, and develop a sense of "groupness" through communication.

There are, however, some differences. The jurors in Twelve Angry Men have an assigned goal: to determine the guilt or innocence of the defendant in a murder trial. Because they must agree on a verdict, the jurors are functionally interdependent. This gives one character, played by Henry Fonda, enormous power. The other jurors must counter his dissenting arguments or remain hung indefinitely. The group therefore treats him as an internal enemy--until he persuades them to change their opinions. In The Breakfast Club, the characters have no interdependent goal at the movie's outset. In fact, the students initially want nothing to do with each other. It is only as they engage in self-disclosure and wage war against an external enemy (alas, a teacher) that the students develop a sense of group identity and purpose.

The movies also differ in age and style. Twelve Angry Men, a 1957 film shot in black-and-white, stars Fonda, Lee J. Cobb, and E. G. Marshall--unfamiliar names to many born in the 1970's. The Breakfast Club, by comparison, was released in 1985, deals with contemporary teen topics, and features a director (John Hughes) and actors (Emilio Estevez, Michael Anthony Hall, Judd Nelson, Molly Ringwald, Ally Sheedy) who are well-known to today's young-adult audiences. This difference gives each movie instructional advantages. Less-than-familiar classic films allow students to focus on communication patterns and concepts without distraction (Vivian, 1991). Contemporary movies tend to be more student-relevant (Moss, 1985), providing better opportunity for identification with the characters (Burton, 1988; Gladstein & Feldstein, 1983). The choice is the instructor's. An option is to have students watch a classic and a current film for contrast and comparison.

CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

Twelve Angry Men

Twelve Angry Men is recommended frequently as a resource for group-process instruction (e.g., Brilhart & Galanes, 1989; Gouran, 1982; Helmick, 1989; Jensen & Chilberg, 1991; McKinney, 1990; Pfeiffer & Jones, 1972; Shields & Kidd, 1973; Wood, Phillips, & Pedersen, 1986). Usually the movie is promoted as a tale of good triumphing over evil, with Henry Fonda's white-suited, nameless character (referred to hereafter as "Fonda") depicted as the hero. Indeed, the jury in the story initially is intent on handing down a quick guilty verdict in a murder case. Fonda is the lone dissenter; he implores his fellow jurors not to make a hasty decision. By calling into question the integrity of the evidence, the testimonies of the witnesses, and the prejudices of the jury members, Fonda leads twelve angry men to a decision of "not guilty."

While the Fonda-as-Hero approach has merit, there are other ways to view the story. The jury's verdict is not necessarily a triumph of good over evil; whether the defendant is innocent of

the crime for which he is acquitted is unknown (an alternative ending might show the defendant bragging that he was erroneously let off scott-free!). Beyond this, some of Fonda's tactics are questionable. He thinks critically about certain issues but not about others (e.g., his certainty about the meaning of the marks on a witness's nose). He is not impartial; he rewards only those who agree with him and berates those who disagree (e.g., yelling, "You're a sadist!" at his primary adversary, played by Cobb). Jurors who join Fonda's side, even for capricious reasons, receive smiles, pats on the back, and verbal reinforcement. By attending to the maintenance needs of jurors who would be overmatched without his support, Fonda turns the tide of conformity in his favor. When his side becomes the majority, he uses group pressure to get remaining dissenters to capitulate (e.g., he solemnly intones, "You're alone" to Cobb near the story's end, while the others stare Cobb down).

What Twelve Angry Men demonstrates is that persuasion in groups can take place through a variety of methods--and Fonda's method is as worthy of scrutiny as any of the others employed in the film. Criticism of the hero in the white suit, however, is not a natural audience reaction. Therefore, an exercise can be used to guide student viewing. Prior to showing the movie, the instructor gives half the class a copy of Handout #1; the other half receives Handout #2 (see Appendix). The assignments are kept confidential. After viewing the film, each group is given time to construct arguments for a "trial" of Fonda. The ensuing class session is then devoted to a debate in which the "pro" and "con" sides attempt to vindicate/indict Fonda.

The exercise provides an opportunity to discuss a variety of issues, including:

(1) Critical thinking (by both the jury and the students).
(2) Ethics in persuasion (is it appropriate for Fonda to use any means to achieve his ends as long as he believes he is defending the cause of justice?).
(3) Task and maintenance roles in group process (and the impact each has on persuasion).
(4) Perception (if Fonda and the defendant are viewed as guilty, how does it alter one's perception of the jury's deliberations?).
(5) Bases of power (French & Raven, 1968).
(6) Defensive communication (Gibb, 1961).
(7) Principles of argumentation and debate (particularly if the instructor uses a formal debate structure for the exercise).

The goal of this exercise is not to vilify a character who courageously plays the role of devil's advocate (in fact, it is easier to make a case for Fonda's virtue than his faults). Rather, the objective is to teach students to evaluate carefully the pros and cons of different communicative goals, styles, and outcomes. Under critical scrutiny, "heroes" and "villains" are not always as clear-cut as our movies sometimes suggest.

The Breakfast Club

"The Breakfast Club" is a title conferred on the movie's central characters by the "Brain" of the group (played by Hall). The club also includes a "Prom Queen" (Ringwald), an "Athlete" (Estevez), a "Basket Case" (Sheedy), and a "Criminal" (Nelson). The monikers identify roles the students play in their high school. During their detention, these roles become diffused and altered through group interaction. The "Criminal," for instance, is a social outcast during the week. Among "The Breakfast Club," however, he has status and power because of his expertise at serving detentions (he is on a first-name basis with the school's janitor). Over the course of the film, the "Athlete" cries, the "Basket Case" comes out of her shell, the "Brain" shows courage, and the "Prom Queen" falls for the "Criminal"--all inconsistent with the roles they maintain outside "The Breakfast Club."

Providing the climate for the members to adopt these new roles is the group cohesion that results from their self-disclosures. With encounter-group overtones, the students make reciprocal revelations about intimate details of their lives. Ultimately, they discover they are more similar than different. Each wrestles with self-acceptance; each longs for parental approval; each fights against (or succumbs to) peer pressure. Stokes, Fuehrer, and Childs (1983) found a direct relationship between intimate self-disclosure and group cohesion. In their research, group members in high intimacy conditions "discussed topics such as their sexual values and what they disliked about their parents" (p. 66)--two of the primary topics discussed by "The Breakfast Club."

Like Twelve Angry Men, The Breakfast Club is a happy-ending story that generally does not invite criticism of its "heroes." The characters' intimate disclosures are portrayed as healthy and self-actualizing, and the group members are assumed to be better off for engaging in open and honest communication. Toward this end, the story subscribes to what Parks (1982) has called an "ideology of intimacy"--the notion that "disclosure makes one happy, healthy, and wise" (p. 83). What the movie fails to show is how intimate disclosures can have negative repercussions. For instance, the revelations made during the detention session could easily become a source of embarrassment (and arsenal) for the group members in the following weeks. Moreover, self-disclosure does not guarantee personal and relational development; in fact, the obverse may be true (Bochner, 1982). As Parks observes, "interpersonal relationships are established as much by privacy, secrecy, and deception as by self-disclosure, empathy, and openness" (p. 90). The Bochner and Parks articles can be used to help students view The Breakfast Club from a different perspective.

The Breakfast Club is rated R by the MPAA; some may find its content and language objectionable. It is wise to warn

students of this beforehand, providing alternatives for those who are sensitive to such issues. One way to address this concern (and preserve classtime) is to have students view the movie outside of class, where they are less likely to feel pressure and discomfort. The students can then write response essays, answering questions such as the following:

(1) Describe the role and status of each group member in "The Breakfast Club." How are these similar/different from the role and status each member holds outside the group?
(2) Does "The Breakfast Club" fit the definition of "group" proposed in class? Defend your answer.
(3) Read the article by Stokes, Fuehrer, and Childs (1983). Cite incidents from the movie that support (or contradict) their findings.
(4) Do you believe the members of "The Breakfast Club" will maintain their relationship in the weeks to come? Defend your answer with concepts and theories from class.
(5) The Breakfast Club portrays self-disclosure as positive, healthy, and constructive. In this essay, argue the opposite; develop a worst-case scenario of what could happen in the weeks following "The Breakfast Club's" detention session. Use Bochner (1982) and Parks (1982) as resources.

The Breakfast Club and Twelve Angry Men are valuable resources for analyzing group communication. Other titles from Table 1 may provide more useful portrayals of group phases and development, inasmuch as they depict groups interacting over weeks and years rather than hours. By assigning more than one movie, or by showing several segments, instructors can use feature films to expose their students to a variety of groups in action.

Footnotes

[1]The author would like to thank Ron Adler, Scott Johnson, Kay Neal, Barb Vivian, and Jim Zalewski for their title recommendations.

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APPENDIX

HANDOUT #1

Henry Fonda's character is usually seen as the "hero" of the movie Twelve Angry Men. His heroics are due in part to his effective use of communication skills we have discussed in class. Watch for and take notes on his use of the following:

-- CRITICAL THINKING

-- CREATIVE THINKING

-- RESISTING PRESSURES TO CONFORM

-- PLAYING "DEVIL'S ADVOCATE"

-- GATEKEEPING

-- REWARDING

-- ATTENDING

-- EMPATHIZING

HANDOUT #2

Henry Fonda's character is usually seen as the "hero" of the movie Twelve Angry Men. Your assignment, however, is to view him critically, looking for weaknesses in his case and his tactics. Watch for and take notes on how he:

-- Employs REWARDING, ATTENDING, GATEKEEPING, and EMPATHIZING only with those who agree with him, while berating and/or ignoring those who disagree with him.

-- Avoids CRITICAL THINKING regarding his own arguments, though he carefully critiques opposing arguments (listen for flaws in his logic).

-- Engages in behaviors related to Gibb's DEFENSIVE CLIMATE (i.e., Certainty vs. Provisionalism, Control vs. Problem-orientation, Strategy vs. Spontaneity).

-- Imposes PRESSURES TO CONFORM on his adversaries.

For the purpose of this exercise, imagine that you know for a fact that the defendant is guilty (you saw him commit the crime). This should assist you in viewing Fonda critically.

TABLE 1

TITLE (MPAA Rating)	GROUP STORYLINE
Breaking Away (PG)	Local teens come of age in a college town
Breakfast Club, The (R)	High school students serve detention together
Dead Poets Society (PG)	Prep school boys form a secret club
Dream Team, The (PG)	Escaped mental patients assist each other
Four Seasons (PG)	Couples vacation together in various seasons
Lord of the Flies (R)	Young boys stranded on a desert island
Memphis Belle (PG-13)	Fighter squadron runs a dangerous mission
One Flew/Cuckoo's Nest (R)	Mental patients conspire against hospital staff
Platoon (R)	Soldiers battle internal and external enemies
Poseidon Adventure, The (PG)	Ocean liner passengers face disaster together
Right Stuff, The (PG)	Astronauts pioneer the U.S. space program
Stagecoach (NR)	Passengers become united while traveling west
Stand By Me (R)	Young boys take an adventurous journey
Steel Magnolias (PG)	Friends deal with life and death issues
Twelve Angry Men (NR)	Jurors deliberate a verdict in a murder case